

Jerusalem Perspective

A Monthly Report on Research into the Words of Jesus
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Was Jesus a Rabbi?

By the time Jesus began his public ministry, he had not only received the thorough religious training typical of the average Jewish man of his day, he had probably spent years studying with one of the outstanding rabbis in the Galilee. Jesus thus appeared on the scene as a respected rabbi himself. He was recognized as such by his contemporaries, as passages in the New Testament illustrate:

- And Jesus answered and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he said, "Rabbi, what is it?" (Luke 7:40)
- A lawyer asked him a question to test him: "Rabbi, what is the greatest commandment in the Torah?" (Matthew 22:35-36)
- And behold, a [rich] man came up to him and said, "Rabbi, what good thing must I do to have eternal life?" (Matthew 19:16)
- And someone in the crowd said to him, "Rabbi, order my brother to divide the inheritance with me." (Luke 12:13)
- And some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Rabbi, rebuke your disciples." (Luke 19:39)
- Some of the Sadducees came up to him...and they asked him, saying, "Rabbi..." (Luke 20:27-28)

Note the diversity of those who addressed Jesus as rabbi: a lawyer, a rich man, Pharisees, Sadducees and ordinary people. Clearly, there was a wide range of Jesus' contemporaries who saw him as a rabbi.

Origin of "Rabbi"

The term "rabbi" is derived from the Hebrew word רַב (*rav*), which in biblical Hebrew meant "much, many, numerous, great." It also was sometimes used to refer to high government officials or army officers (e.g., Jeremiah 39:3,13).

In Jesus' day, *rav* was used to refer to the master of a slave or of a disciple. Thus רַבִּי (*ra-bi*) literally meant "my master" and was a term of respect used by slaves in addressing their owner and by disciples in addressing their teachers.

It was only after 70 A.D. that *ra-bi* became a formal title for a teacher (*The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, Emil Schürer [Vermes, Millar and Black, eds.], Vol. II, 1979: 325-326), and thus cannot correctly be applied to Jesus. Nonetheless, the designation "rabbi" may still be more helpful than any other in conveying a correct image of Jesus to the average Christian reader. If it suggests that Jesus was recognized as a teacher in his day and that he was famous enough to draw students to himself, then "rabbi," although slightly anachronistic, will serve a useful purpose.

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Salted with Fire

by
Weston W. Fields

Among the difficult sayings of Jesus, Mark 9:49 is one of the most enigmatic: "Everyone will be salted with fire" (πᾶς γὰρ πυρὶ ἀλισθήσεται, *pas gar py-Ri ha-lis-THE-se-tai*). What Jesus meant by this strange mixture of "salt" and "fire" has perplexed Greek scholars for a very long time.

Many Interpretations

At least fifteen different explanations for this verse have been offered. Most scholars connect salt and fire with purification because these were both used in the Temple sacrifices.

According to the Mishnah, the Temple priests put salt into the carcass of a bird which had been slaughtered for a whole burnt offering, to draw out the blood: "He [the priest] would wring off its head...slit open the body...soak up [the excess blood on the inside of the body] with salt and throw it on the altar fire" (Zevahim 6:5).

The interpretation that the salt and fire have something to do with purification or dedication is evident in many translations, for example *Today's English Version*: "Everyone will be purified by fire as a sacrifice is purified by salt."

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Hebrew Idiom

Almost all previous explanations of this verse have dealt with the Greek text, but like many of the difficult sayings of Jesus, this one simply cannot be explained from the Greek alone. "Salted with fire" is one of the puzzling statements of Jesus that are unlocked when translated back into Hebrew.

A number of scholars today consider Hebrew to be the most likely language of the earliest written accounts of Jesus' life. This theory seems to be confirmed in another, unexpected way. Mark 9:49 is one of the many passages in Mark which may be translated word for word into Hebrew without changing the word order:

כל איש באש ימלח (see Robert Lindsey, *A Hebrew Translation of the Gospel of Mark* [2nd ed., 1973] p. 125).

I suggest that a Hebrew idiom was translated literally, not dynamically, into Greek. As those who could recognize the Hebrew idiom behind the statement became fewer, its original meaning may have become lost. The range of meaning of the word "salt" in Hebrew can give us a clue to the meaning of "salted with fire."

Uses of Salt

The root מלח (M-L-H, to salt) is used in the Hebrew Scriptures not

only in contexts where it means "purification, preservation," but also in contexts where it is a symbol of barrenness and destruction.

Alcalay's *The Complete Hebrew-English Dictionary* translates the expression זרע מקום מלח (za-RA^c ma-KOM ME-lah, literally, "to sow a place with salt") as "to destroy completely." Such an action is described in Judges 9:45, where Abimelech destroys Shechem. Part of the destruction was sowing salt in the city.

The case of Lot's wife, who was destroyed when she disobeyed God's command and was turned into a "pillar of salt," is well known. It is probably as an allusion to this familiar incident that Isaiah 51:6 uses the root מלח in the sense of "destroy."

A New Translation

I propose a new translation of the verse, based on the retroversion to Hebrew. In the verses preceding 9:49, Mark records that Jesus warned those offending "these little ones," and declared that one would be better off to rid himself of offending parts of his body than to be cast into hell, where the fire never goes out and "their worm does not die." It would fit this context to translate verse 49, "everyone [who is sent to hell] will be *completely destroyed*" — that is, destroyed by fire.

The Hebrew expression, literally translated in Mark's Greek source, would have been understood figuratively by its first readers. But once the Gospel left the world of Palestinian Judaism and its Hebrew-speaking constituency, the meaning of the phrase could have easily been forgotten.

It is interesting to note that several centuries ago two Dutch exegetes — Hugo Grotius in 1641 and Johannes Clericus in 1714 — proposed this very interpretation. These interpreters provide independent confirmation of the plausibility of the meaning of "salted with fire" suggested in this article.

Conclusion

Since Aramaic also has the root מלח (M-L-H), if one prefers to posit an Aramaic rather than a Hebrew original for the sources behind the Greek Synoptics, the interpretation suggested here would probably still be valid. Everyone who is cast into hell will not be salted, but will be destroyed.

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Was Jesus a Rabbi?

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Typical Rabbi

From the Gospel accounts, Jesus clearly appears as a typical first-century rabbi. He traveled from place to place; he depended upon the hospitality of the people; he taught outdoors, in homes, in villages, in synagogues and in the Temple; he had disciples who followed him as he traveled. This is the very image of a Jewish rabbi in the land of Israel at that time.

Perhaps the most convincing proof that Jesus was a practicing rabbi was his style of teaching, for he used the same methods of Scripture interpretation and instruction that were characteristic of the other rabbis of his day. A simple example of this is Jesus' use of parables to convey his teachings. Parables such as Jesus used were extremely prevalent among the rabbis of first-century Israel and over 4,000 of them have survived in rabbinic literature.

To understand the full significance of Jesus being addressed as rabbi, one must know what a rabbi of the first century was and how he functioned in that society. Next month we will begin a series of articles on the life of the itinerant rabbi.

Jerusalem Perspective

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The first letter in the word הללויה is ה (*he*²).

It is the fifth letter in the Hebrew alphabet. In our system of transliteration, *he*² is transliterated "h."

First Sounds

Under the first ה of הללויה is the vowel symbol *pa-TAH*, which we remember is pronounced as the "a" in "father." We already have met it twice in previous lessons: under the last letter of the word יָשׁוּעַ (*ye-SHU-a*^c), and under the first letter of the word אָבָא (*a-BA*³).

If we pronounce only the first two sounds of *ha-le-lu-YAH*, the *he*² and the *pa-TAH*, we get הַ (*ha*). Although it does not stand alone but is always attached to the word which follows, *ha* is a one-syllable word meaning "the." It is the Hebrew language's definite article. For example, שָׁבִיעַ (*sha-VU-a*^c) is the Hebrew word for week — הַשָּׁבִיעַ (*ha-sha-VU-a*^c) therefore means "the week."

Remember our explanation in Lesson One that יָ (*yod*), the Hebrew "y" sound, historically has been transcribed in English with the letter "j" which is today pronounced differently than "y." Here at last is one biblical word spelled with a "j" which, for some reason, is pronounced correctly in English. The "j" of hallelujah is pronounced as the "y" in the word yard.

Command to Praise

ha-le-lu-YAH appears twenty-four times in the Hebrew Scriptures, all in the last third of the book of Psalms. Except for Psalm 135:3 and 147:1, both times in the phrase הללויה כִּי טוֹב (*ha-le-lu-YAH ki tov*, "Praise the LORD for he/it is good..."), *ha-le-lu-YAH* is never part of the psalm itself. It is always added as a preface or a conclusion to a psalm.

הללויה (*ha-le-lu-YAH*) is actually

Hebrew Nuggets

two Hebrew words compounded: הללו (*ha-le-LU*) and יה (*yah*). הללו (*ha-le-LU*) is the masculine, plural, imperative form of the Hebrew verb meaning "to praise." יה (*yah*) is a theophoric element, that is, a

were using this compound word without knowing or thinking of its meaning.

Christians have come to use hallelujah in the same way as the Greek-speaking Jews of the second century B.C. Praising God, however, is not shouting "Hallelujah!" at

him, but consists in recounting his many praiseworthy attributes. הללו (*ha-le-LU*) was a command for others to begin praising יה (*yah*). *ha-le-lu-YAH* literally means what it says: "Begin praising God!"

More Vocabulary

Now that the ה has been introduced we can read the

Hebrew pronoun הוּא (*hu*², *he*). Remember that the symbol ו, the *shu-RUK*, is pronounced like the "u" in flu.

The word הוּא allows us to make a complete sentence:

הוּא יֵשׁוּעַ (*hu ye-SHU-a*^c, *He [is] Jesus*). In Hebrew, as in

other Semitic languages, the verb "to be" does not exist in the present tense — it is understood from the context.

We also are able to read the Hebrew word מְהֵבָה (*a-HAV*, "he loved"), as well as הָב (*hav*). The latter is the masculine, singular, imperative form of a Hebrew verb meaning "to give." This word occurs in a pointed biblical saying recorded in Proverbs 30:15: "The leech has two daughters. 'Give! Give!' [*hav hav*] they cry."

Unrelated to this meaning of *hav* is an interesting modern usage: the Hebrew equivalent of "bow wow" is הָב הָב (*hav hav*). To the Hebrew ear, that is the sound of a barking dog.

In our next installment of Hebrew Nuggets, we will continue learning more about the sounds contained in ha-le-lu-YAH.

Lesson Nine Hallelujah: ה — *he*²

*The Hebrew word הללויה (*ha-le-lu-YAH*) is spelled with five consonants and four vowel symbols. However, we have already learned one of the consonants, י (yod), and three of the vowels, א (*pa-TAH*), ו (*shu-RUK*) and מ (*ka-MATS*). Also, two of the five consonants in *ha-le-lu-YAH* are duplicated. Altogether, then, we only need to learn two new consonants and one new vowel to read the long Hebrew word *ha-le-lu-YAH*.*

shortened form of one of God's names. יה (*yah*) seems to be the first syllable of יהוה (*YHVH*), the unutterable, divine name of God.

הללויה, therefore, is a command to a group to praise God. This may have been the signal given by the leaders of the Temple services for the assembled congregation to burst into praise. It may even have elicited a particular statement of praise from the worshipers.

ha-le-lu-YAH eventually came to be used as an interjection of praise in worship of God. Greek-speaking Jews seem to have used it in that way by the time of the Septuagint, the second-century B.C. Greek version of the Hebrew Bible and apocrypha. This is suggested by the fact that in the Septuagint, *ha-le-lu-YAH* was not translated, but transliterated in Greek letters. Apparently, therefore, these Greek-speakers

The key phrase “if...how much more” generally appears in rabbinic simple-to-complex reasoning. We find this phrase at the heart of the following teaching in which Jesus speaks of God’s great care for his children:

Which of you would give his son a stone if he asked for bread, or a snake if he asked for a fish? If you, then, who are bad, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more your father in heaven will give good gifts to those who ask him. (Matthew 7:9-11)

There is another passage in which Jesus employed simple-to-complex logic to prove God’s reliable care for his children. Worrying about the concerns of everyday life, Jesus warned, is distrust of God and an affront to a heavenly father who is unfailing in providing for his children:

Look at how the wild flowers grow. They don’t toil or spin. I tell you, even Solomon in all his splendor was not dressed like one of these. If thus God clothes grass in the fields, which is here today and tomorrow is used to stoke an oven, how much more can he be expected to clothe you, O men of little faith. (Matthew 6:28-30)

BA·al ha-BA·yit

A third example of Jesus’ use of simple-to-complex reasoning comes from Matthew 10:24-25, and is so Hebraic that in translating it from Greek to Hebrew, the syntax need not be altered except in the case of one word. A literal translation of the Greek will help illustrate how non-Greek and non-English are these words of Jesus:

Not is a pupil above the teacher, and not a slave above the master of him. [It is] enough

Principles of Rabbinic Interpretation

kal ve-ḤO·mer — Part Two

The sage Hillel compiled a list of seven principles of deductive reasoning used to interpret Scripture. In our previous issue we looked at the first of these principles — kal ve-ḤO·mer, simple-to-complex, and examined three examples of its use in the Mishnah. In this article we will look at Jesus’ use of kal ve-ḤO·mer reasoning in his teaching.

for the pupil that he be like the teacher of him, and the slave like the master of him. If the BA·al ha-BA·yit BA·al ze-VUL they have called, how much more the sons of the house of his.

The reference to BA·al ha-BA·yit and BA·al ze-VUL is an example of Hebrew word-play. בעל הבית (BA·al ha-BA·yit, master of the house) is a term often used by the rabbis to refer to God; בעל זבול (BA·al ze-VUL) means “Beelzebul” and refers to Satan. In idiomatic English the passage would be expressed as follows:

A pupil is no better than his teacher, nor a slave better than his master. What is good enough for the teacher is good enough for the pupil, and a slave should not expect to receive better treatment than his master. If the householder has been called “Satan,” it is only natural that the members of his household will be called the same.

The Green Tree

There is a fourth passage in which Jesus used simple-to-complex reasoning, although the key phrase “how much more” does not actually appear in it:

Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me. Weep for yourselves and for your children. For a time is coming when the cry will be, “How fortunate are the women who are childless, the wombs that have never borne and the breasts that have never nursed!” Then they will call

to the mountains, “Cover us!” and to the hills, “Fall on us!” If this is done to the “Green Tree,” what will happen to the “dry trees”? (Luke 23:28-31)

Not only did Jesus make use of the kal ve-ḤO·mer principle of interpretation in this passage, he also used the

rabbinic teaching technique of Scripture allusion. The expression “Cover us, fall on us!” is from Hosea 10:8, and points toward the events of Jerusalem’s destruction. The “Green Tree,” taken from Ezekiel 20:47, similarly hints at the impending catastrophe, but beyond that at Jesus’ role as Messiah.

The people who heard Jesus say these words as he was going to his crucifixion certainly understood that his reference to himself as the “Green Tree” was a bold messianic claim. It also was a warning, for Jesus was telling the people, “If this terrible thing can happen to me, how much more to you.”

As in the preceding example, Jesus contrasted himself to others: if he is called “Satan,” his disciples will certainly be called “Satan”; if he is crucified, those who are weeping for him can only expect the same fate or worse.

It is worth noting that another rabbi made a similar statement some 150 years prior to Jesus, also while on his way to be crucified. Yose ben Yoezer, one of the earliest rabbis known in rabbinic literature, was not only a great scholar but also was referred to as the “most pious in the priesthood” (Haggigah 2:7). The statement he made while carrying his cross to the place of execution is structurally identical to that of Jesus, and it explicitly contains the key words of the kal ve-ḤO·mer formula:

If it is thus for those who do His will, how much more for those who anger Him. (Midrash Psalms 11:7)